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Mike Tracy (208) 342-7985
Sid Smith (202) 224-8708

Fuel of the (Near) Future
by Senator Larry Craig

The last time you drove or walked by a wheat field, did you realize you were passing by an oilfield of the future? It's true.

Early this month, in his State of the Union address, President Bush spoke boldly about breaking the United States' addiction to oil. For a man from a Texas oil family, these were not words spoken lightly. But leaders have spoken of breaking our dependence on oil and other fossil fuels for decades, with little effect, so you're not alone in wondering what is different now. The answer is: "Quite a bit."

After many years, ethanol is becoming increasingly viable as a renewable fuel with many benefits. But what is it? Ethanol is a colorless, flammable liquid that is made through the fermentation of organic materials. It can be added to gasoline to reduce pollution, because it produces fewer greenhouse gases than standard gasoline. The most popular form of ethanol in the United States is made from corn, but ethanol can also be made from wheat, sugar or other plant materials.

I was very excited to hear President Bush mention ethanol as such a high priority, because Idaho is poised to become a very important player in ethanol production. A Canadian-owned company, called Iogen, has done extensive market analysis and selected Idaho as the most desirable area in the world in which to build an ethanol production plant.

Iogen has pioneered a process to commercially produce what is called cellulosic ethanol from abundant crop-waste products like wheat straw or barley straw. Since Idaho is one of the nation's top producers of barley and wheat, a supply of straw is readily available.

Building the plant would truly be a win-win situation for Idahoans. Iogen's plant will provide jobs and produce ethanol, which could be purchased at gas stations around the state and the region. Since ethanol burns cleaner than gasoline, it will help improve our air quality. And of course, Idaho farmers will gain an important new source of income. Crop wastes, which were previously discarded or burned, will be a commodity that can be sold to help make farms and farmers more profitable and the environment cleaner.

To spur cellulosic ethanol production on a large commercial scale, I worked to include loan guarantees for development of this technology in the energy bill that Congress approved and the

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President signed last summer. No facility capable of commercial production of cellulosic ethanol exists because of the considerable amount of risk involved. However, Iogen has spent 25 years developing and fine-tuning its processes and is ready to build a plant that will influence the marketplace considerably, starting in Idaho.

For too long, the federal government has talked about alternative fuels and breaking our dependence on oil, especially foreign sources of oil. Now, advances in technology have brought us to the brink of making one of these alternative fuels a reality. Ethanol is not the answer all by itself, but will play an important role in bringing the United States closer to energy independence. It is clean and abundant, and we can grow a new supply every year. So the next time you pass by a wheat or barley field, enjoy the view of Idaho's oilfields of the future.